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ABSTRACT

The agenda-setting concept in mass communication asserts that the news media determine what people will include or exclude in their cognition of public events. Findings in uses and gratification research provide the foundation for this concept: an initial focus on people's needs, particularly the need for information. The agenda-setting concept reflects the media's three operating characteristics as analyzed by Noelle-Neumann: (1) ubiquity-the pervasive presence of mass media; (2) consonance-the tendency of professional communicators to produce similar details, viewpoints, and emphases when reporting on an issue, event, or person; and (3) cumulation-the continuing treatment of a topic in the press. Denying that the media has immediate effects on public attitudes, agenda-setting aligns itself with a diffusion, or multiple-step flow, model that stresses the importance of interpersonal contacts in determining the effect of media content on people. The agenda-setting concept provides communication theorists with an organizing principle for integrating scientific findings into a mass communication theory. (MAI)

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AGENDA SETTING AND MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

by

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AGENDA SETTING AND MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

The mass media are all pervasive but not particularly persuasive.

That statement summarizes the most significant of the currently accepted social facts and research findings about the mass media in America. Most significant, that is, until the emergence of the agenda-setting thesis.[1]

Though accepting the "pervasive but not persuasive" statement as a truism of mass communication in a modern democratic society, researchers of agenda-setting insist that the media are nevertheless very persuasive in their unique way. But not as the long-discredited hypodermic-needle theory of media effects had warned:[2] in shaping and manipulating people's public attitudes--their likes and dislikes, pros and cons regarding political, economic, and social matters.

Instead, the media are persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issues, and persons and in determining the importance people attach to public matters. The agenda-setting theory says that because of newspapers, television, and other news media, people are aware or not aware, pay attention to or neglect, play up or downgrade specific features of the public scene. People tend to include or exclude from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from their content. People also tend to assign an importance to what they include that closely resembles the emphasis given to events, issues, and persons by the mass media.

Agenda-Setting--Not a 1984 View

Superficially, agenda-setting resembles the hypodermic-needle theory--the 1984 view--of media effects and, by the unwary, may be confounded with it. For agenda setting does assume a direct, though not necessarily an immediate, impact of the media on their audiences. But it also specifies that the impact is not on people's attitudes but on their cognitions, and it attributes these cognitive

changes to be the result of the media performing a gatekeeper, or channel, role[3] in western democracies. The agenda-setting hypothesis does not say the media are trying to persuade--it does not charge them with adopting a prescriptive, or advocacy, role in American society. No, media effects on people are seen as the principal result of the day-to-day work of the press in informing its audiences of the opportunities and warning them of the dangers, real or imagined, in their environment and in the rest of the world. The media, by describing and detailing what is out there, present people with a list of what to think about and talk about.

By avoiding claims of attitudinal effects for the media, the agenda-setting approach aligns itself with the diffusion, or multiple-step flow, model,[4] which eventually supplanted the 1984 view of media impact. That model emphasizes the role of personal influence in changing human behavior. Like that diffusion model, agenda-setting recognizes the importance of interpersonal contacts in determining the ultimate impact of media content on people. It uses interpersonal factors to help explain the conditions under which agenda-setting effects are more pronounced.[5]

News and the Mass Media

The initial version of the diffusion model explained that media effects are indirect, that even information and news flow from radio and the print media to opinion leaders and from these designated influentials to the rest of the population.[6] But that was before television became a permanent fixture in American homes and transistor radios a portable companion away from home. Most people today get their news directly from the mass media:[7] "the mass media are all pervasive."

Even the early studies of news diffusion by communication researchers Deutschmann and Danielson[8] and by Greenberg[9] found that by the late 1960s there

was very little relaying of news from the press to people by individuals dubbed influentials. In a modern society, these studies confirmed, the bulk of the news is obtained from its institutionalized dissemination channels, the mass media. People ordinarily ask others for their personal opinions, not for public information.

But with the 1984 model discredited and the diffusion model restricted to influence on attitudes and behavior, communication theory found itself with an embarrassing gap. There was no theoretical accounting for the way people process information from the mass media and no satisfactory explanation for the media's alleged influence on individuals and groups.[10] Still, despite the lack of unambiguous evidence and scientific explanation for direct media effects, much of the general public and many social critics continue to allude to the power of the press.

Uses and Gratifications Research

There is another research tradition that denies that the press has awesome power. The uses and gratifications approach to the mass media, however, stresses intrapersonal needs rather than interpersonal factors. Instead of regarding newspapers, television, and the other mass media as principally disseminators of news and information and wielders of power and influence, this research tradition assumes they are primarily sources of diversion, gratifiers of individual needs, and entertaining outlets for personal escape. With this assumption, researchers investigate how people use a particular medium for their individual purposes.

They find that audiences are not passively overpowered by what they read in newspapers, hear on radio, or see on television and at the movies. Instead, people "obstinately"[11] put to their own use and for their own gratification the media content they actively choose to pay attention to. They selectively make

use of the material in front of them. Confronted with a cafeteria of news, features, and entertainment from which to select, most of them find about what they want.

Not what the media can do to people but what they do for people is the answer sought by researchers who favor the gratifications approach. They have already identified a near-bewildering number of uses to which the media programs and press copy are put. But the many uses and gratifications defy easy, systematic classification and definition, so necessary for a fruitful program of scientific study. Moreover, this research tradition so far has failed to produce a coherent explanation of media use and it is still searching for an integrative concept and a core set of generalizing hypotheses.[12] Its functional approach to the study of the mass media and their audiences more frequently than not results in further stigmatizing the media as performing a dysfunctional role in society. Ironically, such research often fails to allay the fears of many that the mass media exert a powerful hold on their audiences. In fact, the findings sometimes give additional cause for alarm about what the media are doing to people.

Nevertheless, uses-and-gratifications research offers a valuable alternative perspective to our understanding of the media's function in human society. It has called attention to audiences' varying expectations of the several media. (Which medium, which channel, which program can best--can adequately--satisfy my needs? That's a question seldom if ever explicitly asked, but often if not always implicitly responded to.) Equally important, it has suggested how the varied social contexts in which different kinds of people are exposed to the media can affect their use of and satisfaction with the media.[13]

Agenda-setting theory of media effects is indebted to this research tradition for its starting point: an initial focus on people's needs. Much research

testing of the theory has focused on the citizen's need for orientation during a political campaign. But the theory itself is designedly open to other personal and social needs of the individual that could signal the appearance of the agenda-setting phenomenon.

That is to say, agenda-setting researchers recognize that psychological and social attributes of voters determine their political use of the media. Such use in turn is expected to lead to the appearance of the agenda-setting effect regarding political issues. But not just any of the myriad human traits, psychological or social, are expected to set off the agenda-setting process. These antecedent factors are most likely to be found among the various gratifications sought from the print and broadcast media, among the idiosyncratic uses people make of these media, and among the human needs satisfied by individual experience with the media.

The need for information--the need to know more about the political campaign, the contenders, and the contested issues--is only one type of human need. An obvious observation, yes. But one that suggests that agenda-setting research, following the lead of the gratifications tradition, must be extended beyond the news content of the media. Agenda-setting effects resulting from people's habitual exposure to other media fare must also be explored, and not only during a political campaign.

Using the Media During a Campaign

But even during such a campaign, politically-related information needs may be quite diverse and result in different uses of the media as well as different forms of information processing. For example, a person may seek information for intrapersonal reasons (that is, for private consumption--to satisfy one's curiosity at least) or for interpersonal reasons (to share with others or to show up

others). And the news media may be used not merely to acquire instruction or to help evaluate the political scene. The need for political information may indicate a need for reinforcement.[14] Information would then be sought mainly to confirm or support the political views a person already has.

Not all citizens during a political campaign are caught up in the politically charged atmosphere of their environment. Those with little interest in politics may simply use newspapers and television to "get away from it all" by selecting features and entertainment material and avoiding, as far as possible, political news.

Others during an election year may eventually decide they've "had enough politics for a while" and seek relief in the media's non-political content. That's another kind of escape,[15] this time due to information overload. But since the media have become an essential part of the political environment in this country, can one really escape politics in the media during a campaign season except by avoiding the media altogether?

Under what conditions does heavy use of the media for escape lead to political involvement--a possible result of accidentally coming upon political content in the media? More generally, does a person's habitual use of newspapers and television change <u>for</u> a political campaign? Does an individual's use of the mass media change <u>during</u> a campaign? Such questions, reflecting the influence of the gratification approach, need to be explored in order to broaden the scope of the agenda-setting thesis and to determine the range of the agenda-setting impact on media audiences. Much work needs to be done. But when the agenda-setting theory is sufficiently elaborated and conceptually extended, an essential link will have been forged between two distinct and separate research traditions--media effects and audience gratifications. Perhaps the agenda-setting

concept can bring about a fruitful union between these two approaches so that the role of the print and broadcast media in American society can be validly established and fully understood.

For the present, agenda-setting fills a void in communication theory by locating and defining media power as a peculiar influence, not so much on the substance of a person's mental and verbal behavior but on the structure of those private and social activities. This is no small matter, not only for the individual so influenced but also for society. As I noted elsewhere:[16]

> If it be true that prime sources of what people think about and talk about with others are the mass media . . . then all sectors of public life of a social system may be affected profoundly by what a newspaper prints and television broadcasts. And their psychological and social impact on individuals who regularly and even habitually are exposed to the offerings of the several media and their multiple channels should not be facilely downgraded by pointing to other factors--other factors that allegedly mediate and supposedly mitigate the effects of the media on children viewing television programs or adults scanning their evening newspapers.

Attitudes and behavior are usually governed by cognitions--what a person knows, thinks, believes.[17] Hence, the agenda-setting function of the mass media implies a potentially massive influence whose full dimensions and consequences have yet to be investigated and appreciated.

The media's role in a nation's political, economic, social, and intellectual life and their influence on a person's cultural and religious values, sexual and leisure norms, work and play behavior may be far greater than the agenda-setting theory presently defines it. For the basic claim of agenda-setting theory is that people's understanding of much of social reality is

copied from the media.

In a political campaign, for example, people tend to follow, according to the available evidence,[18] the lead of newspapers and television in deciding what meaning and how much importance to attach to the various issues and to the many aspects of the reported political activity and of the candidates' qualifications. For many this is tantamount to heeding a suggestion about what they should have opinions. Political opinions and attitudes, of course, are subject to the brake of interpersonal influences. Yet not a few social observers[19] claim that in technologically advanced countries like the United States the more personalized group influences on people are weakening and the more impersonal influences are gaining in strength. They point to the loosening of family ties, the decrease in church affiliations, and the avoidance of political-party identifications among voters in America. Is it possible that the mass media are taking over as a functional substitute for personal and group influence--and have become the opinion leaders in a technological era?

The Powerful Mass Media?

In a little noticed--and, among communication theorists, little heeded--call to "Return to the Concept of the Powerful Mass Media,"[20] researcher Noelle-Neumann thinks they have. Her argument, however, rests on an analysis of "three decisive factors of the mass media" rather than on the socio-psychological explanation presented here.

The three operating characteristics of the media analyzed by Noelle-Neumann--ubiquity, consonance, and cumulation--can readily be subsumed under the agenda-setting concept. Ubiquity refers, in a modern society, to the pervasive presence of the mass media, which are indiscriminately available to all citizens for information and entertainment--and, of course, for their personal gratifications. This factor by itself served as the basis for the hypodermic-needle

effects theory, which naively assumed that a widely disseminated message automatically has a widely assimilated effect.

Her other two media characteristics, cumulation and consonance, are the Western world's functional equivalents of two conditions existing in Communist countries that help explain a totalitarian regime's largely successful mind management and social control of its people. The two conditions have been identified as the absence of counter-messages and the Communist Party's monoploly of the media.

Cumulation, as a media trait, is the continuing treatment in the press of a topic, trend, or theme. Because of the repeated publicity given them by the media, the favored topics tend to dominate the attention of the audience. Repetition, we must remember, does not merely help to decrease the noise potential (inherent in any message, channel, or receiver), which threatens the accurate reception of a message. It is also a frequently used rhetorical device of propaganda.

Researchers have found that agenda-setting occurs usually as a cumulative effect. That is, at any specific time a person's ordering of what are the important public events or issues resembles the media's estimate of the same public matters, but only when the media's agenda is measured over an extended period--as a cumulative effect. But for now nothing so nefarious as intentional manipulation or thought control by a democratic press is implied. The agenda-setting function of the media is regarded as beneficial for the individual and for society. After all, it fulfills a need of the citizens to orientate themselves properly toward their environment, an environment that is perceived by them to be ever expanding and increasingly confusing. Both of these perceptions, in fact, are reinforced by the media themselves.

Because they supply their audiences with so many messages about so many things, the media may become for many people sources of confusion--inducers of psychological entropy. On the other hand, because they selectively emphasize certain topics, trends, and themes, they are also producers of an orderly structure, according to the agenda-setting hypothesis. In other words, the media provide more than a lot of news. They supply the slots into which readers and viewers can easily classify it in an orderly way.

People are helped in coping with the vast array of items and views by the way the media arrange, organize, and establish the priorities of events and issues that their audiences should attend to and evaluate. The unfamiliar, complex world or the hectic local political campaign tends to become for a media audience an assimilated, patterned whole, permitting the newspaper reader and the television viewer to feel more in control of their environment. And as a result of so many people frequently and simultaneously turning to the mass media for such help and thereby sharing similar agendas, a large nation or a small community can more rapidly and less disruptively reach a consensus about public matters than would otherwise be possible.

The third trait emphasized by Noelle-Neumann, consonance, refers to the tendency of professional communicators to produce similar details, viewpoints, and emphases when reporting on an issue, event, or public person. For this often noticed agreement among newspapers and between the print and broadcast media, various explanations have been given. These range from usually unsubstantiated collusion-and-conspiracy charges to scientifically unsupported claims of professional objectivity.[21] The real reasons may lie somewhere between these two extremes: namely, the widely held criteria within the profession of what is newsworthy; the traditional journalism style for presenting information; the relative uniformity of background, ideology, and expectations found among

the working press (in contrast to the great differences existing among their audience); the media's common dependence on a limited number of news and information sources; and their similarity in organizational structure and procedures for obtaining and supplying information.

Together with ubiquity and cumulation, this consonance works to increase media's impact on the formation of public opinion by reducing, if not eliminating, the chances people have to practice selective exposure when they use the mass media.

And one can easily understand how a mass audience's notions can be shaped, even distorted, by the media about what are the majority opinions, standards, and values. People tend to form attitudes about public matters with an awareness that others are also reacting to the same problems, events, and issues. Hence their perceptions, dependent on the media, of what most citizens hold can create a compulsion to conform. The more easily persuasible may even be motivated by their perception of the situation to accept the seemingly dominant viewpoint, as reflected in the media.

Whether deliberate or not, such effective social control by the media is a real possibility. And not only during a political campaign. In all spheres of life, to the extent that ubiquity, cumulation, and consonance are operative, the media's power to influence not only cognitions but also attitudes and behavior becomes quite formidable.

This power can be exercised not only by commission but also by omission. Those public matters and those aspects of the social environment that are not reported, not discussed, not depicted in newspapers and over the broadcast media are also not likely to enter into or affect people's discussions and evaluations. And so the consensus reached by the body politic may be inappropriate to the real problems, events, or issues confronting a democratic society.

Out of sight can be out of mind.

In an individual's private life, too, the same adjustment to the media's viewpoints may be taking place. The gratifications-research findings regarding the use of the media for guidance in one's personal problems seem to suggest this.

Media Effects--Coming Full Circle

Yet these speculations and hypotheses about the power of the mass media need to be examined empirically, but no longer in piecemeal fashion nor with the expectation of finding immediate effects on people's attitudes and behavior. Only with long-term studies can media's influence on cognitions be traced validly to their ultimate behavioral effects. Such research will involve observing how changes in cognitive structures modify the attitudes and affect behavior of people exposed directly or, through interpersonal channels, indirectly to the media's agenda-setting influence.

Someone has suggested, not entirely facetiously, that only a pretzel-like model would be adequate for a satisfactory mass-communication theory, because there are so many interdependent and interactive factors that must be taken into account. Mass communication is a human enterprise. And human behavior is fascinatingly complex. The experience of decades of frustrating theory building and model testing is proof of the great complexity both of media influences and of audience gratifications.

With the agenda-setting concept, however, communication theorists may have found the organizing, explanatory principle for most of the isolated facts already known about mass-media structures, processes, and effects. That concept may also prove to be a productive guide for integrating new scientific findings, as they accumulate, into a general mass-communication theory.

The public's apprehensions and the critics' suspicions about the mass media

have intensified as the media have expanded throughout the land. Perhaps, with the extended agenda-setting function fully detailed empirically, those fears and suspicions will at last be scientifically confirmed.

If so, we'll have come full circle in communication theory: The all-pervasive mass media are indeed all persuasive.

Footnotes

[1]Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of the Media." Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 36, 1972, pp. 176-87.

[2]For a critical review of this model, see Everett M. Rogers, "Mass Media and Interpersonal Communication," in Ithiel de Sola Pool and Wilbur Schramm, eds., Handbook of Communication. Chicago, Rand McNally, 1973, pp. 292-93.

[3]In "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 34, 1957, pp. 31-38, Bruce Westley and Malcolm Maclean, Jr., distingusih among three roles in their mass media model: Advocacy (news sources), channel (the mass media as gatekeepers), and behavioral (mass media audiences). In a particular communication situation in which they are involved, the mass media may have any one of these roles.

[4]Paul Lazarsfeld and Herbert Menzel, "Mass Media and Personal Influence," in Wilbur Schramm, ed., The Science of Human Communication. New York, Basic Books, 1963, pp. 94-115.

[5]But agenda setting theory would be wary of claiming that "One could almost define media information which fails to excite interpersonal discussion in public as having the same impact as the philosophical tree falling in the wilderness." John P. Robinson, "Mass Communication and Information Diffusion," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor, eds., Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research. Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1972, p. 88.

[6]Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice. New York, Columbia University Press, 1944.

[7]Roper Organization, Trends in Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media: 1959-1974. New York, Television Information Office, 1975.

Footnotes (continued)

[8]Paul J. Deutschmann and Wayne A. Danielson, "Diffusion of Knowledge of the Major News Story," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 37, 1960, pp. 345-55.

[9]Bradley S. Greenberg, "Person-to-Person Communication in the Diffusion of News Events," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 41, 1964, pp. 489-94.

[10]After reviewing a decade of research in information diffusion, John Robinson totals up a "dismal scorecard on effectiveness of the media in conveying news information" and concludes that the media's role in such dissemination is even dysfunctional: "Mass media largely function to increase those already-existing gaps in information that separate the college graduate from the rest of society and hence may have been responsible for creating even wider divisions of opinion in our society than might have been the case without the media," Kline and Tichenor, op. cit., pp. 74 and 83.

[11]Raymond A. Bauer, "The Obstinate Audience," American Psychologist, Vol. 19, 1964, pp. 319-28.

[12]Similar strictures of this approach have been made by some of its leading exponents: Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, Michael Gurevitch, "Uses of Mass Communication by the Individual," in W. Phillips Davison and Frederick T. C. Yu, eds., Mass Communication Research: Major Issues and Future Directions. New York, Praeger, 1974, pp. 11-35.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Lewis Donohew and Leonard Tipton, "A Conceptual Model of Information Seeking," and Charles K. Atkin, "Instrumental Utilities and Information Seeking," in Peter Clark, ed., New Models for Mass Communication Research. Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1973, pp. 243-68; 205-42.

[15]Elihu Katz and David Foulkes, "On the Use of Mass Media as 'Escape,'" Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 26, 1962, pp. 377-88.

Footnotes (continued)

[16]Eugene F. Shaw, "Some Interpersonal Dimensions of the Media's Agenda-Setting Function," Paper presented to National Conference on the Agenda-Setting Function of the Press, Syracuse University, October 1974.

[17]But see Herbert E. Krugman, "The Impact of Television Advertising: Learning Without Involvement," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 29, 1965, pp. 349-56.

[18]Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, eds., The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-setting Function of the Press. Chicago: West Publ. (in press).

[19]See, for example, Jacques Ellul, Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes. New York: Knopf, 1965.

[20]Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "Return to the Concept of Powerful Mass Media," Studies of Broadcasting, Vol. 9, 1973, pp. 67-112.

[21]Gerbner's analysis of the commercial press in France, for example, found strong support for "the proposition that there is no fundamentally non-ideological, apolitical, non-partisan news gathering and reporting system." George Gerbner, "Ideological Perspectives and Political Tendenceis In News Reporting," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 41, 1964, pp. 495-508 and 516.